



The Influence of Classical Philosophy on Modern Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Classical philosophy has profoundly shaped modern ethical frameworks, providing foundational concepts that continue to inform contemporary moral debates. This paper examines the ethical contributions of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, examining how their ideas on virtue, justice, and the good life have been transmitted and adapted over time. It discusses the enduring impact of classical ethics on modern discussions of rights, justice, and moral reasoning, highlighting how ancient philosophical principles continue to guide contemporary ethical dilemmas in fields such as bioethics, environmental policy, and social justice. By tracing the genealogy of moral thought from antiquity to the present, this study underscores the relevance of classical philosophy in addressing today's ethical challenges.

Keywords: Classical Philosophy, Modern Ethics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Virtue Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, one might believe that classical philosophy has nothing to do with the contemporary ethical issues of our day: after all, such writing is archaic, concerned with politics in a complete city rather than governance in a globalized world, dissimilar in language, time, and place to modern thought. Nevertheless, the foundational concepts of modern ethics today have been profoundly shaped by classical philosophers and their theories approximately two thousand years old. In examining the genealogy of ethics and morality, reconstructing the work of historical thought may provide a deeper understanding of contemporary moral frameworks [1, 2]. There is a moral framework that a vast majority of people in the modern world agree upon; many societies value justice as fairness, impartiality, and equality, and adopt a theory of human rights that dictates the fundamental entitlements for all humans. However, such a contemporary moral framework largely consists of remnants from classical philosophy. The concept of a universal moral code deemed essential today bore its roots in Aristotle and the unbelievable ethics being echoed in utilitarianism. The underlying institutions of justice, dignity, and rights all had precursors in Plato. The genealogy of morals, as developed by Nietzsche, sheds light on the historical processes and events through which a particular discourse on morality has emerged. This perspective underscores that the dialects of morality have a limitless number of other potential avenues in time. Indeed, approximately 2000 years have passed since the articulation of the first ethical theories, and such theories have since been so diffused, altered, translated, and reinterpreted that the original conversation lacks any immediate recognition. There is, therefore, a crucial historicist dimension in understanding contemporary ethics. The workings of ethical concepts as they are transmitted, transformed, and dispersed across time can be uncovered, stretching the understanding of current ethical dilemmas to its far off roots. Subsequently, the paper begins with an examination of the most fundamental aspects of ancient Greek ethics, hinting at the trajectory of these contemplations in contemporary moral thought [3, 4].

Foundational Concepts in Classical Philosophy

The essence of classical philosophy has been foundational in the history of ethical thought. Among the considerations of classical philosophy were the central ethical concepts which have been central to ethical thought in the ancient Western philosophical tradition. The foundational triad of virtue, justice, and the

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good are the central concerns that have provided a focus for discussions throughout that tradition of ethical discussion. Individual classical philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have contributed to the history of thought concerning these central ethical principles and are still providing a basis for much thinking about ethics. How the thoughts of these philosophers were influencing the history of thought is considered. Modern discussions of the interrelated concepts of virtue, justice, and the good and the revival of interest in virtue ethics are considered and these ideas are then applied to the foundational classical philosophical considerations of those centrally important ethical concepts originated in Ancient Greece [5, 6]. Most famous of the ancient Western philosophical texts concerning virtue, justice, and the good are Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, and to a lesser extent, Plato's Protagoras, as well as the works of Socrates. These texts have been profoundly important in the ethical thought of the West for the last 2,500 years. This is in large part because of the profound social influence of the Athens city-state on Western civilization. Focusing on the ancient city-state has the effect of considering ancient Greek political philosophy in general and the unique views of the most important Socratic thinkers about the city-state's value in particular. The thoughts of individual cities are illustrative of a more general city-based political philosophy of the time and the subsequent encapsulation of political philosophy that influenced Western thought [7, 8].

Ethics in Ancient Greece

Ancient Greece is the birthplace of the Western philosophical tradition. The Greek philosophers of the Archaic period tackled fundamental ethical questions for the first time. Those questions are still debated today: What is the right way to live? What role should be played in the pursuit of a flourishing life by such factors as rational conduct, emotional control, and community engagement? In the subsequent classical period, Ancient Greece's unique legacy continued. Experimentalism among the Greeks was combined with an emerging interest in ethics, a mutation that has left an indelible mark on the Western philosophical tradition. The first accounts of Greek philosophy, information about Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, and the skeptics, are included in secondary materials such as biographies. Unfortunately, traditional biographies contain only a few isolated remarks on the topic of ancient Greek biography. A section in Diogenes Laertius on the moral characteristics of the philosophers he discusses, as moral faults or virtues are described, is considered to limit an introduction to the subject; in fact, only Diogenes Laertius provides such a corpus. Among the Greeks a widespread interest in ethical and moral issues is known to have been found since at least Hesiod. However, "philosophy" is to be understood rather narrowly in this discussion. While some "pre-Socratic" schools are explicitly concerned with ethical issues, the rich culture of ethical thought believed to have been found among thinkers, statesmen, poets, and dramatists prior to Socrates may still be labeled "pre-philosophical." Then again, in his understanding of the term, if one reads the first Western philosopher in moral terms, it is Socrates. Although there is a rich non-phonetic tradition in Greek ethical thought, not a single fragment is still known of the poetic works of Thales, Heraclitus, or some others. This leads to the conclusion that the study of ethics in archaic Greece should be marginalized to (re)construct the intellectual climate in which philosophical ethics emerged [9, 10].

Key Philosophers and Their Ethical Theories

Several of the most important philosophers of classical antiquity profoundly affected ethical theory in a manner that has been unequalled, to this day. This subsection is dedicated to a detailed analysis of four of the most significant figures: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle of Athens, as well as the Stoic, Epictetus, who was born a generation after Aristotle's death. These figures are presented in four sub-subsections, and the theoretical sections that follow also focus on great works of Greek and Roman philosophy from the fifth and the early fourth centuries BCE [11, 12]. Socrates is known for having declared that the unexamined life is not worth living. Socrates focused philosophic inquiry on issues of ethics, thus reshaping the classical tradition. In this way, he exposed some of the hidden conceits of individuals within his society. It is hardly surprising that his challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy made him enemies. After all, if most of what human beings assumed to be true was revealed as opinion rather than knowledge, were they not better off in the blissful ignorance that Socrates' followers, the famous 'Skeptics,' argued for at length? Some two generations after the death of Socrates, but nearly contemporaneous with respect to Plato, Aristotle, a pupil of Plato, wrote a work that was destined to become the paradigmatic ethical text of the European West... As such, many of his teachings informed the Christian ethics of the medieval period. The Nicomachean Ethics takes as its point of departure nine chapters of a work that has been lost to

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history, in which Aristotle critiques the views of figures who are identified by him as his predecessors. Another philosopher whose views on ethics are enshrined in a work that has been foundational for the subsequent tradition is Plato. A student of Socrates and teacher of Aristotle, he was one of the most influential writers of the ancient West. Born around 427 BCE, Plato lived during the Peloponnesian war that saw democratic Athens become an object of conquest. Among his many works to survive to this day is a work questioning the basis of political wisdom: *The Republic*. In respect to the doctrine of the forms, the complaint of *The Republic* is that democracy does not permit the best men to rule, i.e., the philosopher kings. While it is true that heredity can help to explain why some persons are more physically fit for rule than are others, the true property for ruling is to possess as a form of knowledge of what is actually best for the state. And this knowledge can be possessed only by a small elite who maintains little concern for material possessions, spouses, or children, those particular things that absorb the attention of the common people [13, 14].

Transmission of Classical Ethics to Modern Thought

Philosophical approaches to such topics as moral conduct, political order, and the fundamental nature of the universe were developed and articulated in antiquity—not just in Greece, but also in Asia, Africa, and pre-Columbian America. Similarly, the ancient world explored the nature of human well-being—often referred to in Greek as “eudaimonia” or living an effective life. Both the ethical theory and the choices of what qualifies as a good life are the subject of this article, which takes as its focus philosophical thought from the ancient Greek landscape, from the early approach of the Presocratic right through the systematic presentation of the Hellenistic schools [15, 16]. The route by which classical ethics has made its impact on modern thought is a procession marked by any rocks of silence as by the recognition of its impact. The arguments of *The Republic*, the comparison of rhetoric and philosophy in the *Gorgias*, the reflections on tragedy and moral psychology in the *Poetics*—these are relics excavated from antiquity, testifying to the vitality and variety of this ongoing conversation. In between these annunciation centuries and our present age of the disciplined historical inquiry into the nature and origins of ethical behavior, limn indicate periods of history when the pairing of ethics and philosophy would have elicited nothing but puzzlement and confused invocation. Consulting the witness of contemporaries, one can make out a catalogue of urgent moral concerns. Inequality, sexual taboos and the implications of hard economic facts preside quite naturally over any emergent conception of justice “in itself.” Yet the great bulk of the quantity created in this pre-philosophical age appears calculated to provide either legal or ritual norms, the injunctions to which execute by appeal to the authority of tradition or transcendent powers. Hesiods’ *Works and Days* and Sastra, Justinian’s *Corpus Iuris Civilis* and the Koran—these are the banners around which ethicities are provoked and fought. There are no ideas here, in the sense of new forms of argument adequately abstracted from particular interests and social strata to qualify as universalizable [17, 18].

Impact of Classical Ethics on Contemporary Ethical Debates

This paper explores the profound impact of classical ethics on contemporary ethical debates, focusing on how ancient ethical concepts are brought up in current moral debates and formulation of moral public policy, and providing examples in biomedicine, environmental debates, and social justice. Developing mature analyses of the classical background within which contemporary moral debates have taken place is not only pivotal to the articulation of more precise critiques of some contemporary positions, but also illuminates new avenues that are promising in contemporary moral discourse. A principal goal of contemporary moral philosophy is to discover and justify rational principles for predicting, explaining, and evaluating agents’ actions, in particular applications, analyses on what reasons in general, or what sorts of reasons, have normative force, and on what agents have a reason to do to maximize rationality under various states of ignorance of themselves or the world. Nonetheless, such preoccupation is deemed notably narrow by broad measures of time and geography [19, 20]. Indeed, interest in philosophers like Aristotle, Augustine, and Confucius has been historically so pervasive as to approach the philosophical norm. There is a vigorous resurgence of interest in the scholarship of the ancients arising in recent years. The intent of the contemporary scholarship is to ask the germs, central ideas, assumptions, commitments, questions, and issues of the great tradition – the sort of inquiries that have been consistently asked of the modern canon since its inception. There is a growing body of scholarship aiming to explicate and evaluate the complex philosophical theories, arguments, and debates of the ancients. Broad agential concerns on how one ought to live (virtuously), what is the virtuous life (the good life), what is the required social context for living such a life (the just life), and how to promote collectively the circumstances available for

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as many as possible to live this life (public policy). Among the ancients, these fields are deeply intertwined. While normative prescriptions depend on background modally metaphysical and epistemological theories, akratic behavior is now understood, empirical discoveries provide us with new reasons to question deeply held beliefs, it is more liable that education is the critical juncture in the formation of moral character on which we putatively attach value, and the connection between health and illness is better understood, improvements in metaphors have little effect on the number of useful new ethical methods. [21, 22].

Future Directions

The context in which political philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, the Stoics, or Plotinus wrote was that of the ancient Greek ΠΟΛΕΙΣ. The guiding principle was verbally expressed by the Greeks themselves as follows: panta ta legomena dei dokhein; or kaì en arkheì archè exéstin ouk un upò sporòn lègousi mónon hotyè hèpyè. The former expression was told by Protagoras as he arrived in Athens around 440 B.C., while the latter one was the result of Aristotle's intellectual exploration more than a century later. Such a principle represents the real and lasting legacy the Greeks left to the modern world. In a nutshell it is called philosophical approach. It means that a position is only as good as the arguments that support it. But in some Greek contexts it could also signify that everything must be exactly proven. Between these two extremes procedural philosophical principles would be intended to be understood. What is important for historians of philosophy, and for philosophers themselves too, is the sensual, suggestive, non-mathematical meaning. The culture Greeks were the first to ask, and to try to answer, such questions, contributing to their birth in a diverse and multi-faceted society:

- What am I doing here altogether?
- What am I supposed to do?
- What is the right way to behave? & elsewhere many keys poignantly similar issues were elaborated about issues of:
- What is nature?
- Are State and Society there by nature or convention?
- Can speaking good help you to win a case in court or become a good politician? [23, 24].

CONCLUSION

The influence of classical philosophy on modern ethics is undeniable, as many contemporary moral concepts can be traced back to the foundational ideas of thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Their discussions on virtue, justice, and the nature of the good life have provided a basis for modern ethical theories, including deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. The transmission of these ideas across centuries underscores the enduring relevance of classical thought in shaping ethical discourse. As ethical challenges evolve in areas such as technology, environmental responsibility, and global justice, revisiting classical philosophical principles may offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary moral dilemmas. Future research should explore how classical ethics can be integrated with modern interdisciplinary approaches to provide more comprehensive solutions to current ethical issues.

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CITE ON: Kagaba Amina G. (2025). The Influence of Classical Philosophy on Modern Ethics. RESEARCH INVENTION JOURNAL OF CURRENT RESEARCH IN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES 4(1):32-36. <https://doi.org/10.59298/RIJCRHSS/2025/413236>